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Interview of Clarence B. Miller
By: Western Sonoma County Historical Society-
Evelyn McClure and Pat ~~Chalk~~ SCHOCH
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CM: My dad's family moved from Nebraska in 1891, they came to Sebastopol. My grandfather, Palmer, on my mother's side was a Methodist minister at the Sebastopol Methodist church in 1900 and 1901. I don't know just when they arrived in Sebastopol. The house they lived in is still there.

PC: Is that the Montessori School?

CM: They were next to the Morris's. That house went through the 1906 earthquake and it's still standing.

EM: What were your parents names?

CM: My dad was Clarence A. Miller, I'm Clarence B. Miller. He was Clarence Arthur and I am Clarence Brewster. My lineage goes back to the Brewster's on the Mayflower so there's been a Brewster in every generation except for this one, my kids didn't want a Brewster.

PC: That's too bad.

EM: Yeah, ruining the tradition there. So they came here. They came here just because your grandparents were here? The Methodist minister that was your grandfather?

CM: I don't really know. I know he was minister in other parts of California. My… over in the foothills, I don't remember which town it was, then when he was minister up at Sebastopol Methodist church he also had Valley Ford and Penngrove.

EM: In a circuit kind-of thing.

PC: When your grandfather was a minister was your dad ordained?

CM: That was my mother's father.

PC: Was she still living at home?

CM: Oh, yeah.

PC: What was your mother's name?

CM: Edith Palmer. And then married my dad. They were married in about 1901 or 1902 somewhere along there. My dad was born in '81 and he was 23 when they were married so I guess it was 1904 when they were married.

EM: What did your parent's do or your dad do in Sebastopol?

CM: Well, my dad did some hauling with a Model 'T' Ford truck. And, he worked for the poultry business at that time hauling eggs and things and he worked for Hess Lumber Company when Hess Lumber Company used to be here. Then he was… he worked for the poultry reserves. When the Depression came along it was a little bit different, but we're not up to that yet. But, anyway, earlier as a kid we went down to the poultry business and would climb on the sacks of feed.

EM: Where did they have the… they had a headquarters building or something like that?

CM: It was down in the area where the old Clock canary was when it was in Sebastopol. In that area.

PC: You mean close to Morris Street?

CM: Uh huh. Down on the end of Morris.

PC: Did you say your house sat, or you were born in a house that sat on a parking lot over there on the church?

CM: Well, the parking lot used to be a hill and our house was sitting on top of that hill. I was born in that house. And, then in 1920, or lets see, we moved into the house that is on fire station now in 1922. I was 5 years old when we moved in there. We lived in a barn over while that house was being built. They tore the old house down and used some of the lumber when they built that house. We lived in a barn while that house was being built. I remember on my birthday, my birthday was in July, it was before we moved, we were still up in the barn, and I stepped on a nail. And, I was getting a red wagon for my birthday so they gave it to me a few days early because I stepped on the nail.

EM and PC: Laughing.

EM: To sooth your injury.

CM: That is about as far back as my memory really goes, about four or five.

PC: Where did you go to school?

CM: I went to Sebastopol Grammar School and then Analy High School.

EM: What did the grammar school look like? What was it like when you were there?

CM: Well, there were two buildings. One up on a hill and the other down below. The lower one was for primary grades and the other was the upper grades.

PC: Is that where Parkside is now?

CM: Yeah. Uh huh.

EM: Do you remember any of your teachers?

CM: Oh, yeah, there's Miss Jones my first grade teacher, Miss Henderson my second grade teacher, Miss Davies is in there some place and then I kind-of don't remember them up until the seventh grade. I had Ed Butts, was the teachers name, and he was a mean old, maybe I shouldn't say that.

PC and EM: Laughs.

PC: He's dead and gone he won't know.

EM: That's okay, I'm sure other people have told us the same thing.

CM: I don't know. A lot of them liked Ed. Then Mrs. Henderson was my eighth grade teacher. I don't know why I kind-of blanked out on the ones in between there for some reason or another.

EM: And, then you went on to Analy.

CM: I went on to Analy. I delivered papers from the time I was in the seventh grade up until I graduated from high school.

PC: Was that the local paper?

CM: Well, no it was the Callboin. San Francisco Callboin. Then I delivered the San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle for a while too. I had three paper routes for a while, and that was too much.

EM: That was pretty sophisticated to have the San Francisco paper delivered in Sebastopol. Wow.

PC: What did you deliver it by? Bicycle?

CM: Bicycle yeah. After high school I went to work for my brother, he was in the trucking business and, that was Rodney. The first couple of years I worked locally and then I got on a hauling lumber out of Eureka and up above Eureka some more. I did that up until WWII and we hauled a lot of fruit in the summer time and all the way down to the market in San Francisco and the market in Los Angeles.

EM: Was it all fresh fruit?

CM: Yes, uh huh. And, then when the Clock canary was going we had a lot of canned apple sauce from there. Worked with them until I went into the service in 1942, and then when I came back I worked until 1951 for them and then I had my wife and family and

the hours weren't very good and then the winter time the work got pretty slow so I went to work up at Miller's Dairy, no relation, but I worked for them for 15 years.

EM: That must have been a pretty active dairy.

CM: It was.

EM: Did they have all their own cows or did they get milk from other people?

CM: They had all their own cows.

EM: And, they bottled and everything?

CM: They bottled, um hmmm.

EM: How far did they distribute? How far did you haul milk for them?

CM: I just… mine was a local route most of it was north of time and then the Occidental area and around.

EM: So you were actually delivering door to door?

CM: Door to door, yeah. I was a milkman. [Laughs] When my daughter was in junior college they were saying that…a person with brown eyes… anyway in genealogy there's something that couldn't happen unless there had to be a milkman involved in there. My daughter whispered my father's a milkman. Everybody heard her say it. [Laugh]

EM: That must have been kind-of fun. You got to meet all your neighbors.

PC: It wasn't too early in the morning or anything?

CM: No, no. I delivered to schools here in Sebastopol in the morning and the stores and then I didn't start out on my route until oh, maybe around 11 o'clock or so and work until usually around three in the afternoon I got finished if I had a fairly early start.

EM: Were you there almost until the time they quite the dairy?

CM: Well, no. In…I went to work there in 1951 there and in 1966-67 we bought a laundry down in San Rafael and I worked down there until we went broke. [Laughs] We sold it and we didn't come out very well. But…after that I was too young to quite working so I went to Foothill school as the maintenance man and I did the gardening and stuff out there. Peggy went to work for Santa Rosa city schools, district office, as secretary. So, I had some kind-of wild stories when I was driving my truck about going to sleep while I was driving. This one time I was hauling a load of cement up to Eureka and I dozed off and the first thing I knew I had hit one of those 101 signs with the right front fender of the truck. I woke up and there was a great big redwood right in square in

front of me and I was able to get it back up on the road and miss that redwood tree. Twenty-one tons of cement behind me would've pushed me pretty good. Another time I was coming back from Los Angeles and they were building the highway into Merced and they had it graded off on both sides, and this one lane was graded off on both sides, and I knew about six miles into Merced that I couldn't drive that distance without weaving. I mean, I was sleepy. I pulled off and set the alarm clock for half hour, and I thought that would be okay. Well, the alarm went off I was up at Livingston which was 9 miles this side of Merced. I had never knew a thing from the time I drove, I drove through Merced and up without remembering a thing. I didn't stay down very long because I was about 6, about 15 miles from where I had stopped.

EM: Well, if you knew the road, I guess you were probably on automatic pilot.

CM: Well, I must have had my eyes open. Right at five o'clock in the afternoon. Of course, there wasn't as much traffic as there is now.

EM: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

CM: I had three sisters and a brother. They're all gone.

EM: They all did various things, did they stay in Sebastopol?

CM: Two of my sisters, no, well, my sister Margarette stayed in Sebastopol. She was the next above me. Then Rodney stayed in Sebastopol. Then my oldest sister lived in Mill Valley and she passed away at 94 years old a couple of years ago. My sister Gladys, lived down there also, she died in 1957. She had cancer, breast cancer.

PC: Was it your dad who when we moved here…

CM: My dad lived in the next to the fire station. He sold the parkstage to the church and then he bought that place and lived there until he died.

PC: He was the treasurer or something?

CM: He was the financial secretary of the church for 57 years. He worked for my brother also delivering freight locally in Sebastopol from the old P&SR. Then Rodney had the freeway express when it used to be and would come in here and he had the office down at the corner at Burnet Street.

PC: Is that where he lived down there where…

CM: Yeah, he lived down there, but his office was down there at the corner of Burnet.

EM: Near the railroad depot.

CM: He worked for him until he was in his 80s keeping his books.

EM: Well, did they take things off the Petaluma and Santa Rosa Railroad and then haul it further someplace?

CM: They delivered in town here from the freight cars that needed to haul.

EM: What kind-of things would come in?

CM: Oh, just regular freight from the stores.

EM: How about outgoing? Did they haul fruit and things to the railroad to be taken?

CM: Well, at that time the railroad went out to the packing houses out in the… and we hauled from the packing houses into the… well mainly San Francisco, but we would take some into Los Angeles. I remember three years in a row I hauled a load of apples into L.A. on fourth of July. You can imagine what the driving scenes looked like on the fourth of July.

PC: Did they do much other fruit, or was it just apples?

CM: Uh, in those days there was berries and cherries, a lot of cherries, too. But, the main crops were apples for us, and pears. A lot of pears from Lake County.

EM: What about dry fruit? Didn't they use a lot of dried fruit?

CM: Dried pears, and dried apples… and dried pears too… It was hauling dried apples in sacks that wasn't any fun. They crawled. Oh they were terrible.

PC: What do you mean by that?

CM: They had them in gunny sacks and sacks they'd put the dried apples in instead of packing them in boxes, they used to pack them in sacks.

EM: Then they'd move around.

CM: They were terrible. They weren't in sideboards, they were tied on. They were miserable. So…

EM: You didn't just drive trucks, you had to help load the load too.

CM: I would load. That's why I've got five vertebrae fused to my back, and both hips replaced and both knees replaced.

PC: Sort-of the bionic man.

CM: It was hard work, I thought I liked it at the time.

EM: It was job.

CM: Yeah, it was a job, and it was during the Depression, so pretty important.

PC: What did Peggy do? Did she work for them when the girls were little or did she stay home to keep the household going?

CM: She worked while I was in the service and after Linda came she worked voluntarily. See Carol was born before WWII. She worked while I was in the service. Lil Fish did you know her?

PC: Lil Fish? Name's kind-of familiar.

CM: Well, she… we had a house up on Nema Street and Peggy sold that while I was in the service so that was money we had to start the house up on Ridgefield and she moved in with Lil Fish, and Lil had a boy about the same age and Lil baby-sat for Peggy and Peggy worked.

PC: Where did she work?

CM: Uh, she worked for the poultry business. And then she worked for the "Sebastopol Times" for awhile. She kind-a kept busy.

EM: What type of military service did you get involved in?

CM: I was in the Air Corp, an airplane mechanic. I changed engines on B-24's back the whole time I was over there in England.

EM: In England.

CM: Uh huh.

PC: Were you there until the war was over?

CM: Over there yeah. I came home and… I got home on a 30 day leave and Peggy and I were sitting up at Camp Percy when the Japanese surrendered and she was so mad at me because the girls had really planned a big party when the war was over and she wasn't able to attend.

PC: The Japanese, they did it after…

CM: After Europe.

EM: I guess you've seen a lot of changes in downtown Sebastopol. Can you remember some of the old business that were there when you were a kid?

CM: Oh, Borba's Stationary, Goldberg's Jewelry, P's Drug Store. P's was…

PC: On the corner there.

CM: Frank Willard's had a garage downtown. He was Jean Graham's father.

PC: Oh, I didn't know he was her father.

EM: This was a person that is still here?

PC: Jean Graham is.

EM: Graham? It is so funny that I know the old names of the community but I don't know that they still had descendants here. There's another person.

CM: She'd probably remember more than I do.

EM: He was involved in city government, Frank Willard's.

CM: Frank Willard's, uh huh, he was oh, public works. My brother-in-law took over the public works after Frank gave it up. Cliff Schultz.

PC: Who else is still around town that you grew up with?

CM: Oh, there's George Frazier's wife, ~~Pearl~~ Beryl, Fred Bollinger…

EM: Lori Horn do you know Lori?

CM: I could get my addresses and go through that. I don't know if Frank Suza is still alive or not. Of course, John Blank was, but he's gone now. His wife Pauline is here. Several of them around here were in my class.

EM: What year did you graduate?

CM: 1935. A lot of them are gone too. I had four real close friends, all of them in the service, and I mean closer than… and they're all gone. I was next to oldest in the bunch, but all of them are gone except...

PC: You didn't live on those… someone I talked to from our church lived during the war in those barracks they had somewhere in town. Maybe that was Colonel Corn.

CM: That was somewhere in town? There were barracks in town here?

EM: Temporary housing.

CM: Oh, Colonel Corn lived in the Quonset hut I thought.

PC: Quonset hunt, maybe so. I remember hearing stories about that during the war, temporary housing in the middle...

EM: Was it a whole group of these things?

PC: Yeah, it was a group of housing, wasn't it?

CM: That was in the service so I never really knew, I remember hearing about it though.

EM: There's probably lots of space because they didn't develop a lot of the subdivisions until the '70s and '60s.

PC: My mother lived in a subdivision up there near Valentine and Murphy up in that area.

CM: Where the congregational church is was my aunt's property, my aunt Edda Nelson

EM: Oh, yes, I know that name.

PC: Up where the community church is?

CM: Yeah, they had 80 acres in there. I picked up apples there until my back was broken.

PC: The Durst's had the across the street.

CM: Her property went clear back to… it was almost over to what the heck's the name?

EM: Regal sounds like.

CM: Up to Regal, yeah. So it was a pretty good size ranch.

PC: It was considered out of town.

CM: Yeah. They had their own apple drier there. I was lucky to pick up apples in boxes instead of sacks. A lot of them picked up apples in sacks.

PC: Is that harder?

CM: Much harder. You had to dump them into sacks and tie the sacks. Lot faster to pick them up.

PC: Which boxes did you use? The little five pound lug box size?

CM: No, the fifty-pound, the regular orchard lug. It was big. I used to get two cents a box for picking them up.

PC: Two cents a box!

CM: Yeah. On a good day I could make three dollars. That was pretty good when I was a kid.

PC: As a kid you were closer to the box too. [Laughs]

EM: Didn't have far to bend. When your parents, when they came here, where were they living before? Back east somewhere?

CM: My mother was born in California. My grandfather was a minister in Kansas before he came out here. I can't tell you where all the Farmington and… I didn't pay enough attention.

PC: That was quite a trip to come out here from Kansas. Something must have gone on.

CM: Supposedly his health. He was in the Civil War and he was asleep lying on his back and was snoring and somebody dumped some cracker crumbs down his throat and they got down into his lungs. And he was discharged from the service from lung problems from the Civil War. What killed him I guess. They figured he was better off in California, drier or something than it was in Kansas, I don't know, so anyway they moved out here I guess for that reason. He lived until 1910.

PC: So then he came out here before he met his wife?

CM: Married my grandmother, Mary Palmer, yeah, they met out here. No, they didn't because Mother… no they came out together. Must have. Yeah, my mother was born out here.

PC: So he's been a member, I guess maybe you know already that our church…

EM: I know some history of it.

PC: Because he was a member here since you were born weren't you, well not a member…

CM: Since my mother's womb. [Laughs]

PC: So you went to the church before this?

CM: This was built in 1915.

PC: Oh, okay so you were…

EM: Three churches have been built there, burned and rebuilt.

CM: That's the third church that has been there.

PC: Was Bordian Hall, was that always there? Or when was that built?

CM: It was attached to the other church.

PC: I remember that. When we first came they were about to move it and that was in 1962.

EM: They moved the building?

PC: It was where the…

CM: The educational wing. It was next to the other church that burned. They saved it, but the church was burned. They said that was from the fire.

EM: Do you remember your parents talking about the church burning?

CM: Well, just that Frank Willard's father I think it was, and another, during the… something to do about Prohibition, they had gone out to Occidental and were preaching on the Prohibition and the next night the church burned. So, they always felt it was winemakers of Occidental that burned that church down, if that was true fact or not I don't know.

PC: So they didn't know how it got started? Did they find out?

CM: I don't know if they did or not. They always felt it was set by the non-Prohibitionists.

EM: They didn't have a really efficient fire department probably at that time either. It might have been in the middle of the night.

CM: I remember my dad was on the city council for one year, or maybe for more than one year, but they bought the first new fire truck while he was on the city council, the France Republic or something. It was a pretty good expenditure for all the things that cost that much.

EM: I wonder how much it did cost.

CM: I wouldn't know.

EM: They would have to go get it wherever it is and drive it, if it was in the United States, and drive it out here. They still do that.

PC: Oh, that nice redwood tree behind the fire station, you said that was planted for your brother?

CM: My brother planted it.

PC: Your brother planted it. For anything special, or just to be planting a tree?

CM: No, he just picked up the seedling from some place and planted it.

EM: And, let it grow.

PC: It's a gorgeous shaped tree. It's the perfect shape, cone shaped, a lovely tree. Did they plant the Persimmon tree?

CM: No, that was there. As far as I can remember it seems like it was as big as it is now. It was there when I was… it is a huge Persimmon tree. We always had a good crop.

PC: We just picked eight boxes off of it. We couldn't reach half of them.

CM: You couldn't get up to the top of it. You need a forty-foot ladder.

EM: They must grow fast. There's someone in our area that's a new home, and this tree is 20-foot high, unless they bought a mature tree.

PC: It's always been there.

EM: Oh, that's the explanation, okay. Well, they must be long lived though too if this tree was at the church for this long.

PC: They must be well. Did you eat them when you were there?

EM: They're a funny fruit aren't they? People say what do you do with them?

CM: My mother used to make Persimmon pudding.

PC: We just like to eat them raw, on cereal.

CM: I cook the pies for Thanksgiving dinner, I bake the pies.

EM: Good for you. Are you a long time pie maker?

CM: No, my first experience.

EM: Aren't you adventurous, that's great.

CM: I made a pumpkin pie the week before and it was pretty good. In fact, I made two of them the week before and they were fine so I made a couple of pumpkin pies and I had cherry filling so I made some cherry pies.

EM: Did you make your own piecrust or did you get pre-made?

CM: No, no, I'm not that adventurous.

PC: Were you very handy in the kitchen when Peggy was…?

CM: No.

PC: I didn't think you… you just learned that since she started getting sick, huh?

CM: Yeah. Peggy used to say that I was much handier than Clarence was in the kitchen. She didn't know who I was to say that I was much handier than Clarence was.

EM: You've become a new person.

CM: We'd go over to church, and she'd say, what's your name I want to be able to introduce you. Sad.

PC: At least you have a beautiful place, like a resort.

CM: It is nice. We're going up on… her birthday is next Thursday, so Carol, Darcy, and I are going up. And, we're going to bake a cake and we're going to take her out to lunch and then just leave the cake at night for the dinner. So…

EM: To go back to your dad being on the city council. Do you remember any comments he might have made?

CM: No, that was when I was quite small. I just remember him being on the city council. I don't remember if it was more than one year or not.

EM: A term is probably a couple of years, if he stayed the whole term.

CM: Yeah, a couple of years probably.

PC: Did your sister Marge and Cliff always live in that house across the street?

CM: No.

EM: We were going to ask you about the railroad. If you could remember, the Petaluma and Santa Rosa Railroad, if you could tell us more, your remembrances of it. Did you ride on it as a kid? Or an adult?

CM: You know, I don't think I ever did ride on it.

PC: You didn't?

CM: No, I don't think so. I never rode on a cable car either. When I was in kindergarten, my oldest sister started junior college and she got to ride the streetcar over to Santa Rosa to go to junior college and I had to walk to kindergarten. I came home and I remember this, I was very very upset that my sister got to ride the streetcar and I had to walk. [Laughs]

PC: Well, wasn't there passengers on the train that went up Main Street? Or was it only for freight? Did they have passenger service too?

CM: I don't think…

EM: Yeah, they did, sure. To Forestville, Graton and Forestville. People must have taken them maybe to work maybe in the canaries. Graton had canaries. I don't know what they had in Forestville.

CM: The Barol's had a big dairy farm, I don't know where it was, in the '20s. They used to have a car, the PS&R would have a car, two cars, loaded with I guess it was workers. We always called them the Barol boys and they'd haul them out there…

EM: They brought a lot of kids up from the city. I think there's even a picture of the Barol Family, the Barol Family has a picture of these kids hanging out the window of the Petaluma & Santa Rosa Railroad car.

CM: They went past our house and we always called them the Barol boys. Kids from the city.

EM: Yeah, a club, a boys club type of thing, and they'd come up and camp and pick berries.

CM: You know as much about it as I do, maybe more. The story that I don't remember was…

EM: But, you never got to ride on it. Terrible. [Laughs]

CM: I don't think I ever did. Just load freight out of there. The earliest story that I don't remember is that one time I went down to sit on the railroad tracks and we had a collie named Don. I remember Don, and Don got down there and sat on the railroad tracks with me and he just barked his full head off because the train was coming around the corner. I don't know if it attracted my parents and they came down and rescued me or the train stopped or what. I've heard that story, but I don't remember it.

PC: You must have been too little.

CM: I was about two years old I guess or something. I do remember Don, the dog.

PC: The protector.

EM: Like Lassie.

PC: Oh, I remember, I was asking about Marge and Cliff's house right across the street.

CM: They lived over on Nebas Street when they were first married. They bought that place after the war, after WW II. They lived right next door to us on Nebas. We lived next to the Benafitz's.

PC: Oh, Al and what's her name?

CM: Leona.

EM: So that housing was all built in there already on Nebas Street, all the houses were pretty built up?

CM: Yeah, it was all built around that time.

PC: How about those houses there on Main Street. They were all there, all those were already there weren't they? No new stuff there?

CM: No, the street was paved and the walls were there and everything. In fact, I ruined my wagon off the hill there, and accidentally went off the wall there one time.

EM: I think they did all that grading for the railroad when the railroad was built in about 1903-1904. So that's when all that was done.

PC: What about Analy and going there? Was the auditorium there when you were there? Or did that happen after graduation?

CM: That building was built in 19… the first class that went into it was 1936.

PC: Oh, right after you.

CM: We went to buildings scattered all over the area there, houses and stuff for classes. The gym was there, the girl's gym.

PC: Which is a library now.

CM: I guess, I don't know. Anyway, they had classes up in the…they built out over the bleachers and had classrooms out there. That was my senior year in high school.

PC: Where did you have graduation? Out on the football field like they do now or inside?

CM: It was in the gym, on the gym. Our class was only 108 so it wasn't so big.

PC: Feel a little cheated though not to have that nice new building.

CM: Yeah, I…

PC: Were the tennis courts there?

CM: No, there were tennis courts. I didn't play tennis so, but I know there were tennis courts. Football field…

PC: Football team… did you play?

CM: No, I delivered papers after school.

PC: You were busy huh.

CM: I never went out for any of the sports. I was pretty clumsy.